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# HOW SHAKSPERE LEARNT HIS TRADE.

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## I.

IN England, when Elizabeth was queen, the little companies of wandering actors were greatly increased in number. They had placed themselves under the protection of rich nobles or high officials, whose servants they declared themselves to be. Their membership was as limited as their repertory; and four or five players were sufficient to produce such simple pieces as were then available, each of the performers assuming more than one character, if need be, very much as all the parts in a Greek play had to be divided between three actors. A slim youth might have to impersonate all the female characters,—and here the English, oddly enough, were more mediæval than the Spanish, who had already admitted women upon the stage. They carried no scenery with them, for it is scarcely too much to say that scenery had not then been invented. They took with them only the most obvious properties, perhaps a crown for the king and a couple of swords for a combat, and the like. They wore as rich apparel as they could get, with no thought of its propriety to the time and place of the play itself. Thus lightly encumbered they could rove at will, ready to-day to amuse the guests of a noble gathered in the great hall of the castle, and prepared to-morrow to please the humbler audience that might come together in the village.

In those days, the English inn was often a hollow square, with a central courtyard girt with galleries; and here, with the permission of the innkeeper, the strollers would put up a hasty platform around which the country-folk might stand, while the persons of quality could look down from the galleries. In London, the performances in places of public entertainment drew such

concourses of people that the city authorities were scandalized, and strove to forbid them; and as a result the players, who had been wanderers hitherto, were forced to build houses of their own just outside of the municipal limits and to establish themselves permanently. They had no models to go by, and in planning their theatres they gave no thought to the sumptuous edifices that had adorned the chief towns of Greece and Rome. They were used to performing in the courtyard of an inn; and, therefore, the first theatre that they built for themselves was apparently no more and no less than the courtyard of an inn—without the inn itself.

The new building was but a hollow square of about eighty feet each way, open to the sky in the centre, and consisting of little more than a quadrangle of galleries, to be divided into "rooms," as they were then called, private boxes as we should now term them, for the accommodation of the more particular playgoers. The whole ground floor was the yard, wherein the solid body of the more vulgar spectators had to stand; and into this yard there was thrust out the stage, a platform perhaps forty feet square. Where the rear gallery ran across the stage there hung an arras, a heavy tapestry curtain, to cut off the space behind, which might be used as a dressing-room. The rear gallery itself, just over the platform, was also made useful, serving as a balcony, a pulpit, a roof, or whatever upper chamber might be called for in the progress of the play. The stage was so spacious that some of the spectators were allowed to sit to the right and to the left, on stools to be hired. There was no curtain to pull up or to pull aside; and there was absolutely no scenery of any kind.

The simplicity of the projecting platform, with its pendent arras at the back and its room in the gallery above available on occasion, the absence of all decoration, leaving the space between the spectators on the stage to represent whatsoever strange sequence of places the playwright might need,—all this was perfectly acceptable to most of the uncritical subjects of Elizabeth. It was not acceptable to the critical Sidney, enamored of antiquity and nourished on the Italian theorists. He protested against a stage on which the scene could seem to change continually simply because there was no scenery to be changed.

Sidney was annoyed that "the player, when he comes in, must ever begin with telling where he is; or else the tale will not be conceived. Now shall you have three ladies walk to gather flowers,

and then we must believe the stage to be a garden. By and by, we hear news of shipwreck in the same place; then we are to blame if we accept it not for a rock. Upon the back of that comes out a hideous monster with fire and smoke, and then the miserable beholders are bound to take it for a cave; while, in the mean time, two armies fly in, represented with four swords and bucklers, and then what hard heart will not receive it for a pitched field." Sidney's contemporaries were not hard-hearted; and they were ever willing to accept a bare stage as a battle-field and as a cave, as a rock and as a garden, as the castle of Elsinore, as the forest of Arden and as the forum of Rome.

## II

The play-makers of that time were men of far more ability than the unknown writers in whose footsteps they were following; but they never set themselves up as innovators. They worked in the old tradition cheerfully, trying to provide the players with the kind of play that they knew the playgoers liked. No doubt, they wished to better their copy if they could, but they were scarcely conscious that they were really making over anew the art they had inherited from their forgotten predecessors. Like these predecessors, they wrote especially to please the groundlings who stood in the yard, but they sought also not to displease the gallants who sat on the stage. They were better educated, and therefore they could go farther afield, not only for material, but also for effects. From Seneca, they borrowed the practice of frequent murder and the evocation of frequent ghosts. In their heaping up of horrors they were probably encouraged by the contemporary popularity of the Italian novelist, with his constant commingling of lust and gore. The laxly knit chronicle-play was soon stiffened into the so-called tragedy-of-blood, a dramatic form which was very pleasing to the Elizabethan audiences and which was tempting even to Shakspeare himself.

While a true tragedy should purge the soul with terror, the tragedy-of-blood was satisfied to thrill the nerves with horror. A necessary figure in the conduct of such a play was a ghost, who proclaimed the duty of revenge, and who, in anticipation, gloated over every bloody stroke of vengeance. The author charmed the eyes of the spectators with combats, hangings, tortures, dumb-shows, and masques, while also he tickled the ears of the audience

with vehement phrases and high-sounding bombast. And yet, however coarse may seem the art of this tragedy-of-blood, it was at least alive, which could be said of only a few of the miracle-plays. As it dealt with the clash of passion against passion, it was essentially dramatic, which the chronicle-plays at first were not. However violent the crudities in the early "Spanish Tragedy" of Kyd, and whatever the flagrant faults of taste and structure in the later "Duchess of Malfi" of Webster, there is no denying the vigor of these plays nor their exceeding vitality. They were planned to be acted then, and with no thought that they would ever be read now. They were devised to hit the taste of the London playgoer of those unsettled days, and they achieved this purpose amply. In so doing the tragedy-of-blood helped and hastened the coming of the true tragedy which was to supersede it.

Thomas Kyd was not the only predecessor of Shakspeare by whose labors the great dramatist was to profit. While Kyd was showing how to knit a plot and how to heap up situations tempting to energetic actors, his friend Christopher Marlowe was helping to transform the shapeless chronicle-play. If in "Hamlet" Shakspeare was at first following Kyd's lead, in "Richard III." he was treading in the footprints of Marlowe. Kyd is the more dexterous playwright, no doubt; but Marlowe is the more gifted poet, with a deeper insight into human motive. Marlowe it was in whose hands blank verse revealed itself as an incomparable instrument for the dramatic poet; and Marlowe it was who showed how to search the soul of man in more than one notable passage.

But his best-known play, "Doctor Faustus," proves that he was not a born play-maker, instinctively grasping the essential struggle and unflinchingly presenting it in the necessary scenes. The play was little more than the mere slicing into dialogue of the old story-book; and only in a chance speech here and there did Marlowe appear to apprehend the full philosophic value of the suggestive theme he had chosen to treat. Now and again he seemed to get to the heart of the matter and to voice his vision with unflinching felicity of phrase; but for the most part he was content to make a use of the supernatural which is not unfairly to be called puerile, just as the comic passages are almost childish. Among the characters were the Good Angel and the Evil Angel and the Seven Sins, all serving to show how close the connection was between the mediæval drama and the Elizabethan.

While Marlowe with his "Edward II." was setting a model for the splendid series of Shakspeare's histories, and while Kyd was complicating the ghastly plot of the "Spanish Tragedy," which was to serve as a stepping-stone to the great tragedies of Shakspeare, other young spirits were lighting up the path leading to the realm of fantasy, where romantic-comedy best could flourish. In the mediæval drama the scenes intended to be amusing were sometimes truly humorous, with a shrewd homeliness of phrase and a direct realism of character-drawing; but most of them were trivial and coarse, and dependent for their immediate effectiveness rather upon horse-play than upon genuine humor. The free adaptations which later scholars had made from the Latin and from the Italian, possessed plots more artfully put together; and sometimes the plays had acquired a certain simple flavor of the soil to which they had been transplanted. But not in the boisterous scenes of the miracle-plays, not in the ingenious imbroglios of the Italian or of the Latin, was there any worthy model for a truly English comedy; and yet in the earlier attempts at romantic-comedy the influence of all three of these can be traced, accompanied by a large contribution from the contemporary English novel, itself derived indirectly from the pastoral-romance of the Continent.

The comedies of John Lyly, "Endymion" and its fellows, seem to us to have literary merit rather than dramaturgic effectiveness. They appear to us too artificial to hit the taste of the town, too distended with labored allusiveness; but before an audience of courtiers they were performed more than once and with some measure of approval. There was a gentle suggestion of gracious courtliness in the atmosphere of these comedies of Lyly's not to be perceived in any earlier plays—a gracious courtliness which is to be found later in full flower in "As You Like It" and "Twelfth Night."

In its main theme Robert Greene's "Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay" recalls Marlowe's "Doctor Faustus," with its naïve handling of the supernatural; but the underplot sets forth a story of young love triumphant over circumstance; and we have here another source of romantic-comedy, with its fresh love-making in the open air, as prettily pastoral as one could wish, though it was also only doubtfully dramatic. Indeed, even in his plays Greene revealed himself rather as a novelist, with a graceful lyric note

of his own. None the less, he had advanced a step beyond the courtly Lyly, a step nearer to that kingdom of romance which was to call itself Verona or Illyria or Bohemia, a desert country by the sea, where exiled dukes were to roam the lonely forest and where lovely heroines were to disguise themselves as lads.

### III

Greene and Lyly, Marlowe and Kyd, had all of them aided the advance of the English drama from out the monotonous formlessness of the mediæval pieces; and they had all striven to devise the kind of play most likely to hit the taste of the Elizabethan playgoer, with his sturdy body, his free spirit, and his alert mind. Then a dramatist more gifted than any of the four came forward to profit by what they had done. This newcomer was no theoretic reformer; he had no artistic code already formulated; he was simply a practical playwright who happened also to be a great poet. Shakspeare's first labors were humble enough, merely the patching of old pieces, whereby he learned the secrets of the craft. Even when he started to write plays of his own there was no overt effort for novelty. He began where the others had left off, as might have been expected from a capable young fellow who sought to earn his daily bread by preparing plays to suit the existing conditions of the theatrical market,—plays intended first to tempt the actors to perform them, and then to tempt the spectators to applaud and to come again the next time the comedy or the tragedy or the history might be announced for repetition.

But, even in this prentice work, there was evidence that the young hack-writer had an individuality of his own. Better than any of his groping predecessors could he use situation to reveal character, and find fit expression for feeling and for thought at the moment of crisis. His earliest plays were little more than imitations; and in "*Love's Labor's Lost*" he was almost as artificial as Lyly, although he was at once closer to life and far cleverer. "*Titus Andronicus*," wherein horrors on horrors' head accumulate, was simply a tragedy-of-blood on the model of Kyd's most popular play. The "*Comedy of Errors*" was only a farce with an ingeniously mechanical plot, and yet redeemed by more than one character of a true humanity. In "*Richard III.*," the disconnected episodes of a history were artfully knit into a certain unity by the incisive presentation of the royal villain. In few of

these earliest plays was there any hint of audacious ambition; indeed, all that the author was aiming at was a chance to earn his living while learning his trade. He was not yet sure of himself or of his audiences.

"Steeped in humor and fantasticality up to its very lips, the Elizabethan age," so Matthew Arnold tells us, "newly arrived at the free use of the human faculties after their long term of bondage, and delighting to exercise them freely, suffers from its own extravagance in this first exercise of them, can hardly bring itself to see an object quietly or to describe it temperately." Shakspeare was a true Elizabethan and he had his full share of this fantasticality and of this intemperance. These characteristics are most paraded in the earliest plays, but they are not absent from the latest, in not a few of which we cannot but note a careless playfulness at times and a reluctance to be bound by any restraint that irked him. The austere perfection of Sophocles was not his ideal; yet when he chose and when the theme he had chanced upon happened to arouse all his powers, he revealed the possession of a constructive faculty not inferior to the great Greek's. When his interest flagged, as for example in "All's Well that Ends Well," he might let his story loiter as languidly as it was wont to do in the old chronicle-plays; or when his subject might be unworthy of him, as happened now and again, notably in "Measure for Measure," he failed to exert himself.

But when his imagination kindled at his theme and he put forth all his strength, it was with unerring certainty that he pierced to the centre of the subject and presented in action one after another the needful scenes,—the *scènes à faire*. "Romeo and Juliet" and "Julius Cæsar," "Macbeth" and "Othello," are plotted with conscious art and consummate skill. They are each of them plays of a wonderful unity of construction. Each has a marvellous beauty of form, being exquisitely proportioned as a whole and carefully wrought in all its parts. These plays, conceived for performance in the little cockpit, which the Elizabethan theatre was, with a bare platform projecting into the yard, with no scenery and no propriety of costume, with the women's characters impersonated by shaven boys, with the gallants smoking on the stage, and with the groundlings restless in the yard,—this "Othello" and this "Macbeth" are truly as architectonic as the stately Attic tragedies, which were performed in the spacious



theatre of Dionysus before the cultivated Greeks. These English tragedies have a solid simplicity of their own, not Greek indeed, but of a kind which the open-minded Greek would have been able to appreciate. They meet the requirements laid down by Aristotle quite as well as the best plays of the Athenian tragic writers—although not quite in the same way. The Greek perfection has been defined as “fit details, strictly combined, in view of a large general result nobly conceived”; and even this perfection Shakspeare attained now and again. He attained it, indeed, whenever he took the trouble to do his best. He attained it in “*Hamlet*,” which is outwardly a mere tragedy-of-blood, with its revenge and its ghost and its final massacre, but which is inwardly the eternal tragedy of the human soul at war with inexorable circumstance. Rarely indeed does the foremost of the English dramatists take the trouble to seek the simplicity of form and the solidity of structure which even the least of the Greek dramatists was ever striving for, although without always achieving them. Here we see how the highly trained Athenian audiences helped to hold the Greek dramatic poet up to a lofty standard; whereas the London audiences, eager and tumultuous and uncultivated, exacted nothing from the English dramatic poet, except that he should deal with life directly and forcibly.

#### IV

Shakspeare was not only the foremost of English dramatists: he was also a practical man of affairs, clear-headed and self-possessed; and it is not to be wondered at that he did not often exert himself more than was needful. He did not write his plays for publication and for posterity: he wrote them to be acted in the theatre in which he was a sharer; and for the most part he seems to have been satisfied when they pleased the playgoers and brought in large audiences. But he was also a great artist, with the great artist's sensual enjoyment in the dexterous exercise of his technical skill; and thus it was that from time to time a rich theme would waken his ambition to go far beyond any demands of the Elizabethan spectators, and to work out an imperishable masterpiece, which would move his contemporaries, no doubt, but which would also carry a message to later generations—a message his contemporaries may not even have suspected.

But it was on the audience of his own day that he kept his eye steadily; and he gave them what he knew they relished, the

coronations and processions and stately spectacles they were amused by, the combats and battles they delighted in, the ghosts and the witches they believed in, even if he himself did not. He had imagination beyond other men, but he had also common sense in the same superlative degree. He had his head in the clouds at times, but he always kept his feet firm on the ground. An idealist, as a poet must be, he was a realist, as a successful playwright always is. He was never remote or unfriendly or retiring; indeed, all the records remind us that he was hearty in his friendships and that he gave himself freely to his associates. He had broad human sympathy; and, although apparently rather aristocratic in his political opinions, he could fellowship with common men; and perhaps this is why common men did not fail to understand him then, and indeed often understand him now better than the more dainty and the supersubtle.

He was not over-squeamish, and he never shrank from plain speech. But he was clean-minded beyond most of his fellow playwrights of those spacious days; and in his attitude toward women he was a gentleman, even in his comedies,—whereas men of far better breeding, Beaumont and Fletcher, for example, were frequently dirty in thought and often foul in phrase. His manners were better than those of the contemporary men-of-letters, and so also were his morals. There was in his plays no silly practice of so-called “poetic justice”; for anything so petty Shakspeare’s vision was too broad and his insight too piercing. But neither was there any paltering with the law of life nor any extenuation of wrong-doing. The sinner has ever to pay the dread reckoning at last, even though it is only by himself that he is called to account. Shakspeare’s philosophy was sound all through, and so was his ethical code, even though it is unformulated. The moral might not be tagged to the fable, but only the wilfully blind could fail to find the lesson. Shakspeare did not think it wise to crystallize his morals; rather they were held in solution, to be tasted and felt, not seen or measured.

Perhaps this was specially evident in the histories, that grand gallery of full-length portraits, in which the long line of English kings step one by one from out the dull annals and start into life, illumined by the inner light of imagination. But it was evident also in the joyous group of poetic comedies, creations of airy and capricious fantasy, in which the poet peopled a world of exquisite

unreality with figures of eternal truth and beauty. What were "As You Like It" and "Twelfth Night" but pure romances shown in action with young lovers wooing wittily, moved rather by pretty sentiment than by any unplumbed depth of passion? Just as other dramatists had relieved a story of terror with scenes of lively humor, so Shakspeare, in "Much Ado about Nothing" and in the "Merchant of Venice," sustained the comedy, which was his chief interest here, by underplots so serious that they might seem almost tragic.

For these delightful fantasies we have no other term than comedy; and yet nothing can be more remote from what we ordinarily understand by the word. "Romantic-comedy" we must call it, and of this romantic-comedy Shakspeare was the undisputed master. Contemporary life is the stuff out of which the comedy-of-manners is wrought; and to contemporary life Shakspeare seems scarcely to have given a thought. The only play of his in which he dealt avowedly with the men and women of his own time and of his own country was the "Merry Wives of Windsor," which was, in effect, only a farce, since the situations of the story determined the characters.

Yet, although Shakspeare gave no thought to contemporary life, it is true also that he never sought to represent anything else. He was no historical novelist to attempt the impossible; and the lovers of the "Merchant of Venice," the men of the watch of "Much Ado about Nothing," the mob of "Julius Cæsar," and the courtiers of "Hamlet," are all of them English, and all subjects of the Virgin Queen. They were first of all human beings, set in special circumstances of time and place; and then they were also Elizabethans, with all the vigor, the humor, and the whim of the men and women whom Shakspeare knew as boy and man in country and in town. Because Shakspeare neglected the comedy-of-manners, his fellow playwrights could not climb unaided to the lofty level of high comedy. For romantic-comedy, as for tragedy and for history, he had set a pattern, and the others were able to work in accordance therewith. But for the modern comedy-of-manners men had to wait for Molière to supply a model which should endure for centuries.

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